

# Select a Taste of Michigan

## Farmer Profile for Randy Willmeng



History of farming operation (include acreage, food grown, etc): Randy's farm has been in his family for 100 yrs. and Randy is a 4<sup>th</sup> generation farmer. Randy's son would make it 5 generations if he decides to stay in farming. Randy's great grandfather came from Illinois and homesteaded and farmed the original 80 acres. In 1944 ownership transferred to Randy's dad and uncle and they ran the farm until the late 70's. At that time Randy and his cousin proceeded to buy out their parents and then Randy eventually bought out his cousin. Randy's dad added more acreage and Randy even more. Now Randy's farm consists of 400 acres of tart cherries, peaches and apples.

**Q: What do you like about farming?**

**A:** I acknowledge that it is hard to compare farming with other occupations because I have never done anything else. After completing school I came right back to the farm. The thing I like most about farming is the fact that you are your own boss. In addition, I love the country setting and wide-open spaces. There is not the busy hustle of cars and people everywhere. I appreciate the fact that it is a great place to raise a family.

**Q: How do you approach farming?**

**A:** You get back what put in, provided the weather cooperates. One has to attack every challenge or problem straight- on. If you want to stay successful you have to be "ahead of the game" and experiment with new cultural practices that result in higher quality or cost cutting and also find the best varieties. Consumers are demanding more red fruit and more flavor. For that reason it is important to precisely examine the crop and wait and pick at the optimum size and color. Waiting too long can result in softer fruit that damages during harvest and packing and has less shelf life. One has to be very exacting in determining the timing and scheduling the harvesting and packing crews to perfectly match that timing to obtain optimum quality, and thus meet consumer demand. It is imperative that the harvest not stop even if it rains. I also cut costs by wearing many hats at once. I handle my own bookkeeping and educate myself on all the regulations concerning labor and pesticides, etc. When one seriously considers all that is involved, it is in some ways understandable that not young people often pursue other careers. You really have to love striving for perfection and all the demands of farming.

**Q: How important is the consumer in your planning and production cycle?**

**A:** The consumer is very important. If you don't stay up on what he wants, then you are not going to be able to sell your products. The markets have consolidated over the years and now the supermarkets dominate the market. The supermarkets are now demanding the highest quality and getting it. To have market share you have to pay attention to the consumer and be able to produce higher quality than your competition to secure your place in the market.

**Q: How do you include sustainable practices?**

**A:** It makes perfect sense for farmers to use all the tools available and pick the best production tool for every production practice. Many consumers perceive that the first thing the farmer thinks of is to go out and apply chemicals. Chemicals are very expensive and farmers generally apply them as little as possible. I coordinate much of my production activities with MSU researchers and use a method called integrated pest management. This systematic method incorporates all production tools to maximize quality while at the same time minimizing input costs. For example, pheromone (hormone) disrupters, a new technique, is being explored as an alternative to chemical control of pests. Sod or turf is being used to prevent erosion, particularly on hillsides, and also to reduce compaction. I also make sure that the soil is not over-tilled and unnecessarily destroy soil structure. In addition, tillage is too expensive to make things look bare just for looks.

**Q: Why do you work this way?**

**A:** The reason is quite simple. I make a living off of the land and I do not want to spoil the "factory".

**Q: What's the basic philosophy that supports the way you work?**

**A:** Farming has been in our blood for several generations. I inherited the work ethic. One does not stop until the work is done. In addition, one has to stay optimistic and not let problems "get the best of you". Provided that one does not incur weather disasters such as frost, winter freeze, or hail the hard work and optimistic attitude will always pay off.

**Q: Why is a program like Select a Taste of Michigan important?**

**A:** We have to tell our story to the consumer and let them know how much attention to detail we give to producing the high quality food that the consumer eats. The Select of Taste of Michigan is an important effort to get that message out to the consumers and help consumers understand why it is important to support Michigan farmers by buying locally produced produce. Most consumers care about purchasing produce locally but it really helps them make wise decisions when produce is clearly designated as Michigan grown when they go to the grocery store.

**Q: What issues do you look to in the future?**

**A:** I expect that there will be very few on-farm packers in the future and the number of buyers is getting few and fewer. The consolidation of packing sheds has been the trend and few growers now pack on-farm even though they may have the facilities. The costs to update and modernize packing lines and hydrocooling systems are cost prohibitive. I have to stay optimistic and I am still planting more acres of fruit trees. I am concerned, however, that we are now importing 50% of our fruits and vegetables. We farm by all the rules and regulations, and have higher labor and safety costs than farmers in other countries. Our cost of production just goes up and one weather disaster can wipe out a year's production. Tractors now cost \$30,000. Another issue that is of concern is that there are not enough young people going into farming. The government needs to lend more money to young farmers to help them get started. I have equity in my farm and the value of the land is my retirement. However, young people do not have access to equity to secure money for loans to gain access to the land they need for farming.

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